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ABSTRACT

The patterns of acquisition of the passe compose and imperfect tenses in French among 16 adult beginning and intermediate students were studied. Based on 15-minute speech samples in which both verb tenses were elicited by seeded questions and cues for descriptive and narrative monologues, the intermediate learners had greater success with the passe compose than with the imperfect. While they were better able to produce accurate forms of the imperfect, they had greater success with the distribution of passe compose. In addition, the salient feature of all past tense errors was the almost systematic use of the present tense in an imperfect environment, evidence that learners may be more aware of the functional attributes of the passe compose than of the imperfect. This suggests that morphological and semantic complexity alone cannot account for this error pattern. Despite classroom drill and analysis, learners may be disposed to avoiding certain tenses. This implies, for curriculum development, the need for the production of tasks eliciting the imperfect, both in isolation and in narrative contexts, resulting in overall increased proficiency with the past tenses. (MSE)

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DEVELOPMENTAL PATTERNS OF PAST-TENSE ACQUISITION AMONG FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNERS OF FRENCH

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Paper presented at the Modern Language Association Convention,
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(Abstract)

The present research was conducted in order to describe developmental patterns of the passé composé and the imperfect displayed by adult L2 learners of French. Acquisition of form and function of these two tenses, a distinction which previous studies have for the most part ignored, is retained. The 16 students interviewed for this study were randomly selected from beginning and intermediate level university language courses. Data consisted of 15 minute speech samples in which both past tenses were elicited by means of seeded questions and cues for descriptive and narrative monologues. Results indicated that the intermediate learners experienced greater success with the passé composé than with the imperfect. This success with the passé composé seems to be related specifically to distribution. While learners were better able to produce accurate forms for the imperfect than for the passé composé, they experienced greater success with the passé composé in terms of distribution. The salient feature among all past tense errors, moreover, was the almost systematic use of the present tensein an imperfect environment, offering further evidence that the learner may be more aware of the functional attributes of the passé composé than of the imperfect. The results suggest that morphological and semantic complexity alone cannot account for this pattern of errors. Language may be preanalyzed and drilled in classroom instruction; classroom interaction may nevertheless dispose the learner to privileging or avoiding certain tenses. The implications of this study for curriculum design and classroom teaching point to the development of eliciting tasks for the imperfect both in isolation and in narrative contexts. It is hypothesized that increased opportunity to use the imperfect orally for completing real tasks will result in overall increased proficiency with the past tenses. This paper presents a brief outline of the research undertaken, followed by proposals for types of communicative tasks for oral past tense elicitation.

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Introduction

To understand and relate past events and routines of an autobiographical nature is generally viewed as the hallmark for intermediate level language ability. Learners of French must distinguish two kinds of past tenses used in performing these ordinary spoken language tasks, the passé composé and the imperfect. Much has been written on more precise and comprehensive ways to help the student make the often subtle aspectual contrast between these two structures. We know, however, that certain explicitly taught grammatical features can remain resistant to acquisition while other features can be subconsciously learned outside of the teaching sequence. Morpheme acquisition analysis provides a profile of the structures the learner has acquired at various levels of proficiency, and can thus reveal differences between what is taught and what is acquired. Given that discrepancies between instruction and acquisition exist, what do the patterns of usage actually look like in the interlanguage of adult learners at the beginning and intermediate levels? What does this pattern suggest to us about the acquisition process? Can we use insights from this research to reconcile such a discrepancy?

Procedures and Results

According to standard textbook explanations, the passé composé designates a completed event in the past; the imperfect designates a state, condition or habitual action in the past. The passé composé corresponds in English to the past or the present perfect. The imperfect corresponds in English to the past, past progressive, "would" or "used to" plus the infinitive. The crucial distinction between the passé composé and the imperfect is not one of relative time frame but rather of verbal aspect, marking the discreteness or lack of discreteness of an action or state of being.

My research was originally conducted in order to describe developmental patterns of these two types of French past tenses displayed by adult foreign language learners of French. Learners' oral production was examined for both accuracy and formal and distributional errors. Sixteen students interviewed for this study were randomly selected from beginning and intermediate level university language courses. Data consisted of 15 minute speech samples in which both the passé composé and the imperfect were elicited by means of seeded questions and cues for descriptive and narrative monologues. Four categories were established to document both target use of the passé composé and the imperfect as well as their errors of form and distribution. The following developmental pattern emerges based on the tabulated results (see handout):

1) We find that the learner exhibits greater over-all success with the passé composé than with the imperfect. In fact, the passé composé is attempted considerably more often than the imperfect at each level. In terms of kinds of errors produced, we find more errors of form than distribution for the passé composé, especially

at the beginning levels; for the imperfect, the pattern is reversed.

2) It appears that certain verbs--all irregular--are privileged in the learner's interlanguage. A lexical analysis of the speech data indicates that over all four levels, aller is the most frequently attempted verb in the passé composé, while être is the most frequently attempted verb in the imperfect. Etre and aller are also the verbs with the greatest accuracy rate in overall learner production, with the verb avoir close behind.

3) The imperfect appears to be clearly under-represented in the learner's speech. Particularly interesting and somewhat contrary to expectations is that many of the errors of distribution for the imperfect are in fact the result of the learner supplying a present tense in an imperfect context (while relatively few present tenses occurred in passé composé contexts).

Discussion

Early second language acquisition studies sought to establish a natural order of acquisition of the morphemes of a given language for both first and second language learners. There is some developmental evidence that French children learn the passé composé before the imperfect. If it were the case, as the results seem to suggest, that second language learner adults also acquire the passé composé first, the question remains as to why this is so. In pursuit of plausible interpretations of the results and in light of those of previous morpheme acquisition studies, we need to consider several not necessarily incompatible explanations.

One way in which investigators have attempted to account for the relative order of accuracy is to say that morphemes are acquired

by learners according to increasing grammatical complexity. It would seem reasonable to expect that the more complex the morpheme, the less likely a learner is to supply it correctly. Some foreign language methodologists maintain that the imperfect is morphologically less complex than the passé composé : it has fewer irregularities and is similar to English insofar as it is a simple, not a compound form, and therefore should provide fewer difficulties. The passé composé, on the other hand, is a compound tense, involving two kinds of auxiliaries, a variety of regular and irregular past participles and a set of rules governing the agreement of the past participle with another grammatical feature. This might explain why we find more errors of form for the passé composé than for the imperfect at the beginning levels; it still does not explain the overall greater accuracy rate for the passé composé.

Might it be that the order in which the passé composé and the imperfect are presented in class instruction is a determining factor in the relative order of acquisition? The beginning textbooks in use in the students' program at the time of the study introduced the imperfect first, followed by the passé composé in the same or in consecutive lessons. Yet, we find more learner attempts at the passé composé than at the imperfect at the beginning levels. At the intermediate levels, where most of the past tenses occur in the data, order of presentation is no longer relevant. In this study, then, we do not find sufficient evidence to show that order of presentation determines accuracy rates.

Researchers sometimes speak of the perceptual salience of certain morphemes as a way of explaining why some morphemes are acquired earlier than others. An extra syllable or a particular

sound may lend a morpheme prominence. One study of the acquisition of English as a second language (Zobl, 1980), for example, reports the systematic use of did in verb phrases to express past events. Thus the sentence "Peter got a shot" becomes in the second language learner's speech: "Peter did get a shot". This speech pattern leads one to suspect that did is functioning as an analytic past tense marker in the interlanguage of the learner of English. A similar principle may be in effect for our learners of French, where the compound form--consisting of the familiar avoir and être auxiliaries contiguous to a participle ending in the sound /e/--marks past time. This favoring of the compound form may reflect as well interference with the English present and past perfects.

If a compound form marks past time in the learner's interlanguage, we might expect to see a good deal of over-generalization of the passé composé in imperfect environments. We do, in fact, see some of this, but most of what we observe is the almost systematic avoidance of tense marking for the imperfect. Such errors may be due to lack of attention to maintaining past tense continuities in longer utterances. It may, be that the aspectual notion of the imperfect is less easily perceived than for the passé composé; that the quality of pastness is not as evident for description or incomplete, habitual actions as it is for complete, unique events. However, the near consistent use of the present in imperfect (but not in passé composé) slots indicates that the learner could already in effect be making the functional distinction between these two aspects.

The success rate for the passé composé with respect to the imperfect may on the other hand be exaggerated. The lexical data reveal that much of the success for the passé composé may have to do

with a learner strategy known as "chunking": the use of utterances memorized as wholes without knowledge of structure but which have a high functional value in communication. In the raw data, je suis allé accounts for most of the instances where the irregular verb aller is supplied correctly in the passé composé. The question-answer format, characteristic of classroom interaction as well as data collection procedures (e.g. Q: What did you do over Christmas? A: I went here; I went there) may indeed prompt the frequent occurrence of such a chunk. This suggests that while language may be pre-analyzed and drilled in classroom instruction, classroom talk may nevertheless dispose the learner, indeed encourage the learner to privilege certain ready-made utterances.

The privileging of grammatical features in classroom talk leads us finally to consider frequency of occurrence of these two past tenses as a determinant for acquisition. More and more, research in second language acquisition seems to support this observation, that the order of acquisition--or accuracy rate of morpheme production--correlates with frequency of input. It is my impression as a teacher that passé composé cases are more frequently elicited and used than imperfect cases. In order to test this out, I obtained both observational classroom and textbook data. As predicted, the teacher talk observational data corroborated my intuitions: an overwhelming proportion (84%) of all past tenses used by the instructor was in the passé composé. A survey of several beginning and intermediate textbooks in use at the time of the study revealed a predominance of exercises and activities favoring the passé composé. Those which elicited the imperfect generally prompted only the forms.

To be sure, it may very well be that the relative frequency

of these two tenses in the observational and informant data reflects their actual occurrence in native speech. Nevertheless, the implications of the results of this study for language teaching would indicate more attention to input, or the kinds of things that make for aural input in a classroom environment, as a major factor in the acquisition process.

Input Hypothesis and Implications for Classroom Teaching

To return to my original question: Can the discrepancy between what is taught and the actual acquisition patterns displayed by the learner be reconciled? My answer would be a tentative yes, given the small amounts of data and the general paucity of adult second language acquisition studies of French. In terms of relative sequencing of the passé composé and imperfect structures, there is little evidence from this study to suggest that the passé composé should be taught before the imperfect or vice-versa. The greater success rate of the passé composé should not be taken at face value as sufficient reason for presenting it first in the syllabus, at least until the fundamental factors contributing to its success are determined. The fundamental factor for successful oral production appears to be substantial aural input.[1] My impression is that the imperfect is largely ignored in the learner's input for several reasons. One, there is perhaps a sense among instructors that the past tense is synonymous with the passé composé. Indeed, those who advocate presenting the passé composé early in the syllabus in effect betray the feeling that the imperfect does not satisfy communicative needs as

[1]It should be mentioned that recent research has shifted attention from the problem of adequate input as a causal factor for acquisition to the nature of the input to the nature of interaction and learner behavior likely to generate more usable input, considered crucial for successful acquisition. Classroom centered research has

well as the passe compose. Two, I suspect that the passé composé might be simply easier to elicit in isolated context than the imperfect. "What did you do last night?" prompting the passé composé is felt to be more inexhaustible as a topic than a question eliciting the imperfect such as "Who was your best friend in grade school?" which as an eliciting device does not bear as well repetition. Furthermore, time constraints and often over-loaded syllabi militate against sufficient use of the past tenses: a common characteristic of teacher behavior is to use/test to exhaustion the grammatical feature being taught, then abandon its use in order to move on to another structure. Finally, class methods and materials may actually discourage natural oral use of the past tenses. It should be pointed out that most exercises and activities in textbooks are not targeted for speech. The standard, widely used paragraph which students are directed to render in the past tense tends to introduce subtle and ambiguous aspectual distinctions. Such discrete point exercises eliciting the past tenses often invite analysis and deliberation rather than encourage their spontaneous, confident use in speech. As long as only grammatical analysis and testing of forms take place, even the direct methods fail to ensure sufficient target-like input and use of the past tenses.

It is predicted that increased opportunity to hear and use the imperfect for completing real speech tasks will result in overall increased accuracy for the imperfect. Implications for classroom teaching point to the development of oral elicitation techniques that would guide the learner to identifying the aspectual function of the imperfect. I propose a technique that would integrate tense

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only begun to address the issue of language acquisition in a language-poor environment where input is highly restricted. (cf. Gaies, 1983)

usage with the currently popular speech act approach. It would provide a structured format to enable learners at the beginning and intermediate levels to maintain tense continuities in longer utterances and at the same time clarify and reinforce the meaning of the imperfect by appropriating its usage to specific topics. Such a technique would furthermore generate input from a variety of sources--the students themselves--rather than rely on the instructor as the unique purveyor of language.

Conclusion

Looking at foreign language learner developmental patterns can help identify specific deficiencies in teacher talk and in classroom talk. If the ability to use the past tense in speech to reminisce and to share personal experiences is to be a standard for intermediate level language programs, then the past tense must be made available in the learner's input. The development of speech task oriented materials based on insights from second language acquisition research is a longterm enterprise, demanding further classroom-centered research. My purpose has been to explore implications of second language acquisition findings for teaching, and to suggest considerations and a general direction for the development of materials facilitating the use of the past tense in speech.

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